

A VIEW ON LIFE A

Thirty-five years in uniform, three wars, 30 bases, 20 aircraft, 90 years worth of wisdom. Meet a Colorado National Guard living legend.

*He's strafed German troop trains in France's Saar Valley, married the woman who treated his battle wounds, stalled out in a fireball of destruction in Korea, survived 100 combat missions in Vietnam, flew 20 different aircraft, was stationed at 30 bases around the world—there's not a lot that Bill Eugene Myers, Colorado National Guard's oldest living veteran, has **not** done in his 35-year military career, except talk about it—until now.*

By Air Force Staff Sgt. Aaron Rognstad
COLORADO NATIONAL GUARD

Tucked away atop a hill near Bailey, Colo., resides 90-year-old Bill Eugene Myers. His house, perched on a knoll, offers a spectacular view of the Front Range foothills. Spectacular too is this veteran's longevity and experiences in three wars.

At 5 feet, 8 inches tall with a gaunt frame, Myers doesn't brag about his exploits in World War II, Korea or Vietnam. He rarely talks about them, and then only with the right company.

He answered the door for this interview dressed in a flannel shirt, blue jeans and cowboy boots – the look of a rancher.

Inside, his living room holds pictures of high adventure in flight and many books on aviation and military history. With help of that memorabilia, including die-cast metal models of fighter planes, Myers recalled the memories of wars where the objectives were clear and the rules less confining.

Military beginnings

He joined the Colorado Army Guard's 168th Field Artillery in Golden in 1938. His drill check for a private back then was \$5 – used for spending money, he said.

He had always been interested in the military growing up. After spending a good portion of his childhood on his grandparent's ranch, he became fascinated with the cavalry. Off to military school he went. Randolph-Macon Academy in Front Royal, Va., taught young Myers conformity and a highly structured lifestyle.

"I enjoyed it. It was tough. They don't have them



ND WAR

like that anymore. They hazed you and beat you when you were a freshman."

Myers graduated from the academy in 1938 and joined the Colorado Army Guard that same year while attending the Colorado School of Mines in Golden. Within two years, Myers had flunked chemistry and was flat broke. He dropped out of school, took a short hiatus from the Guard and worked in a lead, zinc and silver mine in the panhandle of Idaho for six months in order to get back on his feet financially.

"One day the Guard sent me a letter stating that if I went on active duty with them for a year, they would make me a staff sergeant," Myers recalled, who was a corporal then. And took up the offer

Myers said a Guardsman's average drill in the CONG field artillery prior to World War II consisted of drill and ceremony, classes and training on the French 75mm artillery piece at Camp George West in Golden.

"We had just been mechanized," Myers said. "When I joined I thought we were still using horses, but trucks were pulling our artillery. The world was changing."

And it was about to change in a monumental way.

A sign from the sky

Myers' unit was activated in early 1941 and put on a year's worth of orders. The unit convoyed for training to Camp Forest, Tenn., attached to the 7th Army Corps. Off base one Sunday afternoon while Myers was on a date, he heard the news that Pearl Harbor had been bombed and America was now at war.

His regiment was immediately ordered to the Philip-

pinas but due to the extensive amount of transports being sunk on their way to the islands, Myers and his fellow Soldiers ended up at Camp Roberts near Paso Robles, Calif., for a short stint before they were moved up to Camp McQuaid at Monterrey Bay, Calif.

"California thought the invasion was coming," Myers said. "We were all on alert. There were Cossack posts (sentries) on every bridge and everything was blacked out at night."

It was around this time that Myers made the switch to the U.S. Army Air Corps. The clincher came a year before while he was on maneuvers in Louisiana. He knew he wanted to fly when his truck was hit with a flour sack dropped from a circling airplane on a training bomb run. Right then he knew he was on the wrong end of things.

Myers put in his paperwork for a commission and flight school. He thought if he didn't make it through flight school, he'd end up a gunner or a maintenance troop on a ground crew, which would still be better than the field artillery.

After more than a year at flight school, Myers earned his wings as a single-engine fighter pilot and commissioned second lieutenant. It was 1943 and the air war in Europe was raging.

In January 1944, the 24-year-old Myers found himself stationed in England flying P-47s on missions over Western Europe. His missions consisted of fighter sweeps (strafing and dive-bombing ground targets) and bomber escorts.

"Anything that moved was a target – period – anything that moved," Myers said. "They didn't have all these restrictions in what you can and can't hit these days."

Myers said he had three air-to-air kills, 12 air-to-ground, two





1920: Bill Eugene Myers is born in, Ra
1938: Joins the Colorado Army Guard
1941: While training to Camp Forest,
1944: Stationed in England flying P-4
1950: Flying P-51 Mustangs with 67th
1967: Serves year in Vietnam as depu
1973: Retires as a colonel and returns
1983: Retires for good after working

Left: Bill Myers holds the photo of his original 168th Service Battery, Colorado Army National Guard. He shows off his military patch collection spanning from 1938 as a private in the field artillery. Every squadron or unit that Myers was either in or was assigned to by Staff Sgt. Aaron Rognstad)

probables (might or might have not been shot down in the air) and three damaged – all aircraft of some sort. Periodically, Myers and his fellow pilots would throw parties to celebrate air victories and blow off some steam from the stressors of constant air combat.

“In those days you were supposed to get a shot of whiskey after every mission,” Myers said. “We did that the first couple days and then realized that was a waste of whiskey. What good’s one shot of whiskey? So we started saving our shots for one big party.”

Bail out or belly-in

It was at one of these parties that Myers met his future wife – a 22-year-old Army second lieutenant physiotherapist named Louise – but at the time she was dating his company officer. A few months later Myers began to date Louise after he was treated by her for wounds stemming from the strafing of a German troop train in the Saar Valley in France in late November 1944.

Myers’ plane was hit from multiple shells fired from an anti-aircraft gun mounted on the roof of the train. Flak from the shells tore into Myers’ body. His engine was on fire and he knew that he was going to have to bail out. After reaching an altitude of around 2,000 feet, the fire in Myers’ P-47 engine extinguished, but oil continued to pour out of it.

“If you lost your oil, you were in deep trouble,” Myers said. “I thought I was well over 10 miles behind our lines and finally the oil pressure went to zero. So I started to look for places to belly-in, because you never bailed out of a P-47 if you could belly-in because you’re apt to get killed real easy.”

With blood spurting from an artery in his wrist and his plane out of oil, Myers crash landed in a field. American troops found Myers lying next to his plane and told him that he had crashed only a couple hundred yards from the German lines.

Myers had flak lodged in his neck, chest, left leg, right shoulder, hand, and even between his eyes. Despite his injuries, he was back in the cockpit within a month.

“I was real lucky,” Myers said. “Luck and stupidity took over skill and cunning.”

Myers flew 147 combat missions over Europe in World War II that included sorties for Gen. George S. Patton’s legendary 3rd Army that broke out across France. Myers came home from the war a decorated

hero. But it wouldn’t be his last time.

Same tactics, different aircraft, new enemy

After the war, Myers remained on active duty and was stationed at a series of U.S. Air Force bases. Along the way his son Peter and his daughter Sally were born.

In 1947, the Army Air Corps became the Air Force while Myers was stationed at Eglin Field, Fla. He said there was no big ceremony of any sort inaugurating the new branch and the only thing that changed was the new uniforms.

“We were sort of glad to be our own outfit,” Myers said of the transition.

Within the newly established Air Force, many squadrons were transitioning from propeller-driven planes to jets around this time, and Myers became certified on the new P-80 Shooting Star at Pine Castle Air Force Base in San Bernadino, Calif.

“It was quite a jump,” Myers said of the new jet. “It took a little longer to take off; the temperature affected it more There were no simulators and there were no two-seaters, so it was kind of like your first solo all over again the first time you flew it.”

In June 1950, North Korea crossed the 38th-parallel border and invaded South Korea. It didn’t take long for Myers to get back into aerial combat. By August that year he was flying P-51 Mustangs with the 67th Fighter Squadron out of Taegu, Korea.

Myers’ missions were primarily ground support operations that dealt with low-level bombing and strafing. He said there was always lots of anti-aircraft fire that he and his pilots had to deal with, due to this, the rate of downed P-51 fighters in his squadron was greater than that of the P-47s in his old squadron in World War II.

Myers recalled one close call over the skies of Korea.

“I saw this big haystack that I thought might be hiding something, so I gave it a burst and it blew up right in front of me. I was very low to the ground and I flew right through the fireball. My engine was dead and I punched everything (the tanks and bombs). I switched gas tanks and hit the primer and my engine started running. From there I flew it on home.”

Myers said air and ground combat tactics in Korea were similar with those in World War II, just on a much smaller level. Myers made the rank

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of major during his year-and-a-half in the war. He was 31 years old when he left and had flown 90 combat missions. He saw helicopters for the first time while he was there as well as the first jets in combat. He also saw from the air the devastation that the Chinese inflicted on an American division during the massive Chinese offensive in the fall of 1951.

"An entire American division was retreating while the Chinese were advancing," Myers said. "I saw SOS stamped out in the snow and all around it were the remains of tanks and equipment. The whole division was wiped out."

Even though the war was considered a success by American standards, Myers felt as if he and his pilots had certain restrictions placed on them that kept them from inflicting the maximum amount of damage upon the enemy, unlike World War II. Myers said he couldn't bomb certain parts of North Korean infrastructure that he thought to be a threat.

He liked Korea though, and said it was interesting and beautiful from the air.

"There were lots of hilltop fortresses and old Chinese ruins," Myers said. "I was just glad to be up in the air and not down on the ground slugging it out."

Upon his return to the States, Myers and his wife Louise had their third child – a girl they named Terri – in 1952.

Vietnam – "That was a bad one."

Based out of Tuy Hoa, Myers was the deputy commander of materiel for the 31st Wing during his year in Vietnam in 1967-68. He was in charge of the wing's avionics, munitions and field maintenance.

As a colonel, Myers was still flying close-air-support combat missions in F-100 Super Sabres. If Korea put restrictions on Myers and his pilots, Vietnam was a chokehold.

"You couldn't hit a target until you got permission from the providence chief," Myers said. "You had to coordinate with the Vietnamese on a lot of targets and you couldn't fly into Laos or Cambodia."

Overall, Myers was disappointed in the outcome of the war.

"It sure wasn't like World War II or Korea," Myers said. "We didn't lose the war. They (the politicians and American citizens) lost it in the States. That was a bad one."

Myers rarely saw what he was bombing in Vietnam. He said all he would see was a bunch of leaves and some smoke go up after his bombs

hit the ground. The tree cover was so thick that it concealed targets most of the time. He said the landscape of the country from the air was a triple canopy layer of trees and beautiful beaches along the coast. He didn't get to see much else of the country as he rarely went off base except for missions in the air.

Myers flew 100 combat missions during the war. It would be his last war in a decorated military career that saw him fly 20 different aircraft while stationed at 30 different bases around the world over the span of 32 years.

A love of flight and airplanes

Myers retired from the Air Force in 1973 as a colonel and returned home to Colorado to settle down with his wife – so he thought.

In 1973, Myers took an aircraft quality control position as a contractor for the Royal Saudi Air Force and he and Louise ventured off to Dahran, Saudi Arabia. What he thought was only going to be a two-year position ended up being 10 as he and Louise came to enjoy the country and his salary.

"It was a land of swift justice, good food and beautiful beaches," Myers said of Saudi Arabia.

Myers retired for good in 1983 and now enjoys reading books – mainly works of history – and riding horses.

"When you retire, you have no more weekends," Myers said. "It's all one long weekend from there on out."

Myers paused monetarily and lit up his corn cob pipe while a Hank Williams song could be faintly heard on the radio. Snowfall hindered the normally beautiful view from Myers' living room window. Not a good day for flying.

What was it about flying that Myers loved so much to do it for more than 30 years?

"It was exciting," Myers said. "You think of nothing else but flying when you are in the air in a fighter. It's total focus when you're in the cockpit or you're dead. When I was a little kid I wanted to be like my granddad and raise horses. But soon as I started flying, I knew that was what I wanted to do over and above the rest."

The Colorado National Guard, the Air Force and a grateful nation are thankful he pursued his passion. 🙏